



# Presencing

JACK BLACKBURN'S NEWSLETTER

## Focusing and Presencing – Part I

**Theme for this Issue:** This issue has been a while in coming. I have decided to deliver it to you in two parts. Part I is a discussion of Focusing, Presencing, and other approaches that led to the development of the **Table Talking Class** .

We start by looking at presencing. Here is an ancient technique for presencing by using words. In Theravedic Buddhism monks continue meditating while performing ordinary tasks by silently naming their bodily actions and sensations as they are being performed. This practice is called *naming*. By *naming*, the meditator is learning to focus on phenomena that only occur in the present moment. The effect is to keep at least one part of the mind present. This results in quieting the part of the mind that thinks and chatters obsessively. We can learn to apply this same technique in therapeutic relationships. Here are some related approaches.

*Focusing* is a technique that psychologist and philosopher Eugene Gendlin, a protégé of Carl Rogers, developed that accomplishes a similar effect to naming in the client. Somatics, as articulated by Thomas Hanna, incorporates a process that produces a growth of consciousness in clients by increasing their sensory awareness in each part of their bodies. Martin Buber, in *I and Thou*, describes a presenced meeting place that occurs between two individuals who are thou-ing (presencing) one another. To me, the concept of presencing, is a common thread in any of these approaches. The Table Talking class combines all of these approaches so that caregivers can use the power of verbal interaction to bring their clients the experience of self-healing through self-presencing.

Finally in Part I, the review of Margaret Jacoby Lopez's, *Sing Past Winter*, gives an example of the creativity that can be unleashed through such self-presencing.

### ***Finding Zero - Finding Presence***

*Like the zero in mathematics, presence is hard to define because of its no-thing-ness. Like zero, presence would seem to have no objective reality and yet it's applications may change the ways we understand the therapeutic relationship. Presence, like zero, is a placeholder with no measurable reality. You might say that zero does nothing except take us conceptually to a whole new reality. Because zero represents nothing, and because it was imported from foreign cultures (Arabic, Indian, Chinese) it was considered a secret form of magic and resisted very adamantly. Like zero, presence stands for nothing material, but it implies a whole new level of awareness. Like zero, the attributes of presence: deep silence, stillness, emptiness and no-thought, produce effects that can change our whole sense of reality. The gifts of presence, produced as it were from nothing, can relieve all suffering, heal all illnesses, release us from our addictions and habitual behavior, and awaken us ! to a new world. The discovery of zero is obscure and probably was ancient and secretly passed down because it did require a different level of non-tangible understanding. The final acceptance of the concept of zero changed mathematics forever. The practice of presence is perhaps even more ancient than the secret of zero, but has usually only been taught to those who were willing to learn it's principles, and look at life from a wholly different place, a place of curiosity and mystery. The practice of presence exists perhaps in all spiritual traditions, at the core. After one has undertaken all the steps of purification and prayer and abstinence... sometimes like the Buddha or like Christ in the desert one comes to presence the deepest mystery of all*

*sometimes like the Buddha or like Christ in the desert, one comes to presence, the deepest mystery of all... there is nothing to do, no need for purification or prayer or abstinence... only the practice of aligning oneself with the moment, the continuous eternal NOW.*

## **Focusing, Somatics and Self-Authorship: A Breakthrough for Bodyworkers?**

**Scope of Practice:** For some years I had been searching for an approach to bodywork that would address the altered states that occur in sessions. Most massage training programs avoid this area in student education. They have been considered by-products of the relaxation effects of massage. Practitioners are taught to support but not encourage these unusual states in the client because that encouragement could take the practitioners "outside of their scope of practice."

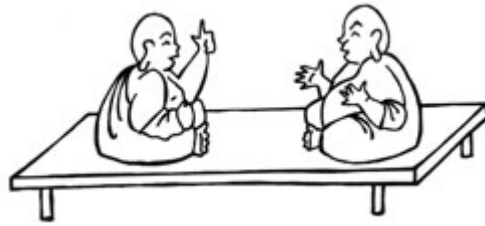
**Altered States:** In most of my classes and supervision sessions practitioners have brought up these kinds of situations as semi-regular occurrences, wondering, "What do I do when these situations occur?" The review of Margaret Jacoby's book in this issue of *Presencing*, offers one example of what can happen when we are willing to accompany a client through a process that takes us way beyond the treatment of physical symptoms.

**Focusing and Somatics:** I went to graduate school to train as a Spiritual Director because I realized that the kinds of spiritual openings my clients were experiencing deserved a different kind of support than I had previously learned. During graduate school I was introduced to Focusing as a client-centered tool that would allow clients' own truths to emerge naturally. I had already found that somatically based bodywork, especially as expressed by Thomas Hanna, could aim in the same direction. Focusing seemed to avoid the trap of the practitioner misreading the process by emphasizing that the client is always the authority figure. Later another guideline in Focusing had great impact upon me: the practitioner who learns to practice self-Focusing, and receives sessions from others regularly, is in a much better position to accompany clients who are opening to their own self awareness.

**Supervision:** In graduate school I was allowed to use my sessions with clients as the test basis for the verbal interactions I was developing to support the client's process. I wrote up many case studies and took them to supervision. With the help of supervision I discovered that I was using my insights and intuition to "lead the client." This feedback was very helpful. I became very sensitive to this kind of appropriation of the clients process. I was learning how to become more trusting of the client's observations. I started putting my emphasis upon becoming a better listener rather than being the "expert." When I read Martin Buber, I realized that the "meetings" that occur in the therapy relationship are sacred; both persons are opening to divine intervention.

**Self-Authorship:** When I read Thomas Hanna I realized that what I really wanted was to help the client become somatically aware. What Hanna does not talk about is the opening to the sacred that can happen through the somatic experience. I found that when this opening to the sacred would happen, the client's whole life would change for the better. I later termed this process of self-creation or self-authorship. The person who presences becomes the conscious author of his/her life, which includes all experiences, past, present and future. The energies of blaming and victim ideation are transformed into empowerment. With the acceptance of self-authorship, presencing links inner experience to outer experience. They become reflective of one another, which the client experiences as the power of his or her own creativity.

## Table Talking Class



*Jack, I congratulate you on this class and the effects it is having. For many years I have disliked the "silence while at the tables" format of most trainings, and have encouraged students to be in verbal contact in a variety of ways. Too often the silence is a cop out. Keep talking."*

*Deane Juhan, author of Job's Body, July 2006*

The Table Talking class draws upon our experiences with clients and many of the principles of Focusing, Hanna's somatics, presencing, active listening, and ethical criteria that encompass altered states of consciousness. The methods used include: body scanning, client interaction through breath and inner touch, practitioner narration and tactile stimulation, client naming, a process, like Focusing, of developing an inner vocabulary for somatic experience, and shifts in body-mind states of awareness, like felt-shifts in Focusing.

**Words:** The following is an excerpt of an article I wrote for the Washington State AMTA as an attempt to explain the need to develop an approach that would allow practitioners to legitimately accompany their clients with verbal interaction. I then developed a course called Table Talking with my colleague and good friend Cynthia Price PhD who was doing research with verbal support for women that dissociate when touched. You can read Cynthia's reports of her findings in the Journal of Bodywork and Movement Therapies. We carefully constructed the steps of verbal support we wanted to teach so that the practitioner could learn incrementally. We wanted to create a method that would keep the dialog between practitioner and client body-centered so that everything that would arise could be confirmed somatically.

### ***Table-talking: Verbal Interaction - The Missing Piece in Bodywork***

*Words can be friends bringing practitioners and clients together. Our words and our client's words can make more conscious the interactions that happen through touch. Words can be messengers that bypass tissue barriers. Words can companion the sensations that arise from the body. Words can help retrieve information buried deep within the body. Words can elicit feeling tones that help the client listen. Words can be codices that help us translate the language of the body. Words can lend coloration to changes that occur as awareness grows. Words can be comforts and supporters in places of pain and fear. And words can be trail markers as we mutually discern the path of the session.*

The central assertion of the article is that verbal interactions that relate directly to bodily responses are helpful in releasing holding patterns and are essential to educating our clients. Bodyworkers know from experience that the body doesn't lie. We also know that most verbal therapies rely upon communication that is not rooted in felt experience in the body. Bodily sensations, unless they are pleasurable, are considered irritations and punishments. Most people carry stories about their bodies into a session. Learning to feel and listen to the sensations of the body, we encounter the emotions, thoughts, and experiences associated with feeling, sensation, and insight.

Part of our role is to companion our clients as they discover that their body did not betray them or that their body is not the source of their guilt or fear. In fact, the body is a good and loyal servant to each of us - it reflects back

to us exactly what we are dealing with internally. It is a communicator extraordinaire. If we feel love, our body gives us signals that feel wonderful even when accompanied by pain. If we feel anger, guilt, or fear, our bodies reflect those emotions as uncomfortable sensations. As bodyworkers, we are constantly listening to the language of the body with our hands and from our informed experience.

One of the steps in raising clients' consciousness about their bodies occurs when we verbally address those body parts we are touching by describing in non-judgmental language what we are doing and what we are feeling with our hands. This introduction to the body's language draws the client's conscious awareness to the site upon which we are focusing; a very important piece in bodily awareness is awakened. We can also ask the client to experience that body part when our hands are removed, feeling the echoes of our work. As the client has this felt sense of that part of the body, symbol and meaning arise. The client may have visual or auditory experiences arise as well. When a body part is consciously explored, the client usually becomes aware that other non-painful sensations occur at that site. Then the practitioner asks the client to use words to describe the sensations that he or she is experiencing. Those words, when mirrored back by the practitioner, help clients become! more and more refined in describing what they are feeling. Excerpt from "*Table Talking... for full article see Jack's web site.*" ©Jack Blackburn, 2003

### A Review of Sing Past Winter By Margaret Jacoby Lopez



*Dusk wraps the valley floor  
The owl's flight beats back night, and then it happens.  
It is as if darkness rose from the meadow  
and descended from the sky to meet just above  
the trees. At that moment all is still... Listen*

*From: Sing Past Winter, M. Lopez*

The last issue of *Presencing* contained a case study of chronic pain about a client I named "Virginia." I can now reveal her identity, because Margaret Jacoby Lopez has given me permission to review her book in this issue. I will start the review by telling a little more of the story of our work together. I worked with Margaret for about three years. During that time I did bodywork and spiritual counseling with her. We would always find ways to reference her experiences to what she was feeling in her body. Before her surgical trauma, Margaret was a successful artist in Seattle. As I described in the case study, Margaret learned how to presence her pain- in various ways. There were times when her pain and her experiences threatened to overwhelm the therapy process.

The reason for reviewing this book and telling more of the background is so that readers and colleagues will understand what amazing depths were reached through Margaret's willingness and courage to use her body experiences, especially pain, as entrée into her own psyche. While presencing she had some amazing occurrences in which she gained passage into other dimensions. She realized during these experiences that she was never alone. She found herself saying: "God give me a gift for the pain." She started hearing poetry inside; she would write down what she heard. The depth and freshness of the words and concepts startled her. She would read these poems to me at the beginning of her sessions. They were so profound that I realized that

I must have been listening to her inner teacher. I knew that Margaret had virtually no prior experience of writing poetry.

The first series of poems inquired into the hidden mysteries of ritual and sacrament. Margaret had been raised in the Anglican Church and her father was a famous cleric in Australia. These very personal poems seemed to bring new meaning to her. She was being taught an esoteric form of Christianity. Words and phrases would come that she had never heard before. I suggested that many of the concepts seemed very similar to the writings of the alchemists. She soon became aware that she felt a strong resonance with their concepts.

Around that time Margaret went to Australia to be with her father who was dying. While there her poetry continued and she became aware of more alchemical links. She remembered that one of her ink drawings had been published in a book about Alchemy by the famous Jungian therapist, Maria von Franz. For the first time in 20 years, Margaret looked at the book. She discovered that, a few pages ahead of her drawing, was drawing with strong links to her own work done by the famous Alchemist Jacob Boehme, in the 16th century! After her father's passing and due to these new revelations, Margaret went through a period of retreat and discovery. Then as always she was aware that her pain was the portal through which so many inner doors were opening. During that time the poetry started to change; an entirely new poetic work was emerging and in her renewed approach to painting, an alchemical process was emerging that seemed to express this new poetry.

Sing Past Winter is the book that grew out of this next period of very creative work. The language in Sing Past Winter is "incarnational." By that I mean that everything pertaining to the body is part of the spiritual dialogue. There is no apology for speaking of God through body parts and secretions. Like the naked child who has not learned the knowledge of good and evil, the songs are without shame. And we may cheer, for these songs are expressions our own bodily innocence, our own naked curiosity, our discovery of body love and pleasuring, and our soul's bodily presence. In her presencing words, Margaret lets her body speak for us. These body songs, body psalms, are open and gutsy: some are pleadings, some are grateful, some are painful grapplings, and some express ecstatic love and surrender. For those of us who have worked with bodies for so many years these songs come as confirmation of the resurrected body as the sacred vessel through which life happens! , the sacred, secret vessel through which we enter, experience, express, and depart this earthly life.



*It was then I entered through a human doorway  
pulled past my body's breath  
Flutes played.  
beyond my brain cells - detaching knowing.  
I was not in me.  
I was in the sound breaking over my sight-  
an opened vision.*

*My shadow anointed the light  
with my nakedness furnished.*

*My childhood's quiver, red bow my passion,  
rain tree honey enough for comfort,  
my hands cupped full of memories -  
Who am I?*

*From: [Sing Past Winter](#), M. Lopez*

Bodies, revealed and celebrated by her artwork throughout the book, and in her bodily-mediated words, are indeed sacred vessels. The signs of bodily aliveness we take for granted or thanklessly shame in our hubris, become resurrected through sacred love. Margaret does something that most spiritual teachers have avoided. Margaret speaks for the body, rather than pressing a fig leaf over our innocence. There is no need to hide our love, there is no need to prove our faithfulness through artificial sacrifice. Life and love are sacrifice to one another. It's as if the body says: "You must come into me if you want to know God. For too long you have searched elsewhere. For too long you have dulled the experience of your senses. Do not be afraid of your bodily experiences; do not fear that God will punish you for enjoying and sharing them." It is a great honor to review Margaret's great contribution and to share part of her presencing process with you. Blessings.

To purchase a copy of [Sing Past Winter](#) [click here](#)

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